

# L.A. latest city trying to fight false alarms

## Rule requires monitors to verify a crime before calling the police

By Valerie Alvord  
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LOS ANGELES — Millions of Americans try to buy peace of mind and protection from crime by installing burglar alarms. But a growing number of police departments are balking at the high cost of responding to false alarms and are setting new rules.

Los Angeles is the largest city to fight back by requiring alarm companies to verify a crime is in progress before police will respond to someone's house or business when an alarm sounds.

At least nine cities, including Las Vegas and Salt Lake City, have similar rules that have cut false alarms substantially and freed officers to work on real crime, police say. At least 85 cities are waiting to see how the Los Angeles system works before adopting similar rules.

"Once Los Angeles adopts it, this is going to be like a steamroller going across the country," says Shanna Werner, alarm administrator for the Salt Lake City Police.

Nationwide, false burglar alarms cost police an estimated \$1.5 billion each year. The equivalent of 35,000 officers get dispatched to 38 million locations where alarms are tripped accidentally, according to a Justice Department study published last year.



By Dartian Douvarganes, AP

**Hahn:** City councilwoman says the new policy leaves many people feeling vulnerable to crime.

barking or something seems amiss. Sending out patrols and installing extra equipment are expensive. Also, critics say relying on neighbors to check premises is dangerous and unrealistic.

"Would you go into someone's house if you thought a burglar was there?" asks Dorothy Freeman, 70, a community activist. "This new policy is like putting a sign on our front yard: 'Open house for burglars.' If they know the police

The Los Angeles City Council adopted on Feb. 4 the policy that requires visual verification of a crime before police respond to an alarm. But passage didn't come easy, and the debate continues because the revision doesn't take effect until April 15.

Opponents say the police are abandoning the public by not responding to burglar alarms.

Supporters, including the Los Angeles Police Commission and a majority of the council, say alarm companies are stirring up the dissent. After all, they say, it's easier to sell a burglar alarm system when a company can say police will respond to every alarm.

"The lobbyists for the alarm companies have done a good job of sending out faxes with scary overtones," says Joe Gunn, executive director of the Los Angeles Police Commission. "They're worried because we're hearing from police departments across the country that if we do this, they are going to climb on the bandwagon."

A typical alarm system involves wiring windows and doors with sensors. An alarm goes off if the windows or doors are opened. A system often includes interior sensors to detect motion.

When an alarm is tripped, the alarm company calls the residence or business. If no one answers, the company calls the police. A customer generally pays \$300 to \$2,000 to install an alarm system and pays about \$24 a month for the monitoring service.

Under Los Angeles' revised policy, if no one answers the phone, the alarm companies must visually confirm it's an emergency before calling police. They could send their own security patrol or use a video camera that would turn on whenever an alarm is sounded.

Police say they'll also accept the word of a neighbor or passerby that a window is broken, a dog is

aren't going to come, the alarm system won't scare them."

Many experts say there's no question that burglar alarms work. "The probability of burglary is higher for homes without alarms," says Simon Hakim, a Temple University economics professor who studies police issues.

Even so, he agrees that the Los Angeles change "is the right solution." He says false alarms are costly, overburden the 911 emergency systems and provide no service to people who don't have alarms.

False alarms usually occur when someone accidentally leaves a door or window open after turning on the system or a pet sets off a motion detector. L.A. business owner Sherry Lopez says that just because police find no evidence of a crime, that doesn't mean an alarm was false. "Suppose a burglar heard the alarm and fled?" she asks. "That's the way it's supposed to work. A crime was averted."

L.A. City Councilwoman Janice Hahn says the policy leaves many people, especially women and seniors, feeling vulnerable to crime. "They believe that if an alarm goes off, the police will respond. That has been a covenant between the police and the people for a long time," she says.

Police say the policy will benefit alarm owners because officers will respond within 10 minutes to verified emergencies. Currently, an alarm call is their lowest priority. Under the new policy, officers will still respond without visual verification to panic buttons, medical alerts and other alarms that are manually activated.

"People on fixed incomes aren't going to be able to afford alarms," says Arnie Bell, president of the Southern California Security Association. "They're already paying for police (through taxes), and now they'll have to pay for a security guard as well."